

NEPALI Times

#387

15 - 21 February 2008

16 pages

Rs 30

Times

nepalnews.com
Weekly Internet Poll # 387

Q. What kind of state system would you like after the elections?

Total votes: 6,915



Weekly Internet Poll # 388. To vote go to: www.nepalitimes.com

Q. How would you describe the Madhes general strike?

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SHOWS OF FORCE: The first Maoist election rally in which they declared Pushpa Kamal Dahal president passes Nepal Army soldiers rehearsing for the Shivaratri parade at Tundikhel on Wednesday.

MIN RATNA BAJRACHARYA

Plan A

India doesn't seem to have a Plan B on Nepal

PRASHANT JHA in
NEW DELHI

New Delhi is confused and frustrated about continued uncertainty over elections in Nepal.

Nepal watchers here are convinced that missing the deadline yet again will mark the collapse of the peace process. They say they are working on politicians in Kathmandu to get their act together, but admit their leverage is limited.

An exasperated official told *Nepali Times*: "We can't do much if Kathmandu's myopic political class doesn't want elections. They will create new excuses, and this time the excuse seems to be the Madhes."

Indian agencies are said to be in touch with all Madhesi groups, but deny India is instigating trouble in the Tarai. "Why would we want to prolong instability and bloodshed in the Madhes when its first negative fallout is on our own side in Bihar and UP?" asked one official.

Delhi has alerted the Bihar authorities about the presence of Madhesi militants, but officials say without more engagement from Kathmandu it is unlikely that Patna will step up the heat on the extremists.

The policy thrust now is for a quick fix on the Madhes to enable polls to go ahead. It is a difficult balancing act of backing the larger process while maintaining influence over Madhesi groups.

India is happy with the unity and alliance of Madhesi groups and the distilled six point demands.

"The government must sincerely reach out to the Madhes, and Madhesi groups shouldn't allow themselves to be used as a pretext to cancel polls. They should consolidate and get votes," said a senior diplomat, summing up Indian policy.

India is also keen on an understanding between the NC and Madhesi groups to strengthen 'democratic forces' so they can stand up to the Maoists. On her recent visit to Delhi, sources said US ambassador Nancy Powell warned her interlocutors that the Maoists were bullying their way through the process. There is concern here that the Maoists will use the YCL to intimidate voters and rig elections.

India doesn't seem to have a neat Plan B in case elections do not happen. But one top policymaker told us, "We don't

even want to think of that scenario...it will be like a civil war."

Meanwhile, the king is lobbying hard in Delhi to retain the monarchy. Son-in-law Raj Bahadur Singh was in town this week meeting the BJP's Rajnath Singh and Jaswant Singh, among others. The message is that the Maoists plan a power grab, and only the monarchy can counter it. The royals were pleased about BJP prime ministerial candidate L.K. Advani launching a blistering critique of India's Nepal policy last week.

EDITORIAL
Destination of the nation p2

STATE OF THE STATE CK Lal
The day of the pretenders p2

Nepal is high on New Delhi's agenda these days. Minister for External Affairs Pranab Mukherjee personally tracks Nepal and speaks regularly with Prime Minister Koirala. The visit to Kathmandu this week by senior Congress leaders Digvijay Singh and Verappa Moily is described here as testimony to the importance Sonia Gandhi attaches to the situation in Nepal. ●

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Published by Himalmedia Pvt Ltd, Editor: **Kunda Dixit**
Design: **Kiran Maharjan**
Director Sales and Marketing: **Sunaina Shah** marketing(at)himalmedia.com
Circulation Manager: **Samir Maharjan** sales(at)himalmedia.com
Subscription: subscription(at)himalmedia.com,5542525/535

Hatiban, Godavari Road, Lalitpur
GPO Box 7251, Kathmandu 5250333/845, Fax: 5251013
Printed at Jagadamba Press, Hatiban: 5250017-19



DESTINATION OF THE NATION

A decade of war had already sapped the nation's energy when king Gyanendra grabbed absolute power in a military coup on 1 February 2005. The year that followed was even more disastrous. The military budget shot up, trade and investment declined, foreign aid dried up, and the economy stagnated.

The April 2006 uprising was all about democracy, but essentially the people wanted development. And for that they knew they needed democracy and peace first. They understood that an absolute monarchy and Maoist extremism were obstacles to development.

Now, three years later, Nepalis are having doubts about the political parties ever getting their act together. It's all well and good to say that a messy democracy is the least of all evils, but when it utterly fails in governance it squanders the people's trust. That is happening now with the collapse of the state's mechanism for delivery of basic supplies and services. Nepalis are giving up hope that their lives will get better in their lifetime.

Soon it will be two years since the restoration of democracy. Politically, the Maoist leadership has found it more difficult than foreseen to convince its YCL storm troopers about the mainstream path. The other parties can't seem to rise above petty name-calling and mudslinging.

The YCL extortion and intimidation and the perception of instability has driven away investors and frightened everybody else. This is almost as bad as the war years. Oil subsidies, bankrolling of cantonments, paying for elections has taken away a chunk of resources and the treasury is empty.

The international community has been over-generous with advice, but hasn't put its money where its mouth is. Where are the funds promised for security sector reform, resettlement of internally displaced or rehabilitation of conflict afflicted population?

The government, led by the Finance Ministry, has been holding hearings prior to a donor consultation meeting scheduled for 21-22 February. It has proposals to raise resources for infrastructure development, health and education. But perhaps the most crucial challenge at the moment is to find funds for ambitious post-conflict reconstruction and peace-building.

The election for a constituent assembly is necessary, but not enough to ensure long-term stability. Development can't wait for the resolution of the Madhes crisis, in fact it is a pre-requisite to peace in the tarai and hills. The perception that there is a government that is looking after the welfare of the people is an important component of the conflict resolution process: that should be the nation's destination.

The government's job is to govern efficiently and with accountability. The main protagonists of peace are the Nepali people.

Rock and hard place

The Madhes and Pahad differ widely over state restructuring

Perceptions in the Madhes differ from the state restructuring agenda in Kathmandu, and this is one of the reasons for the deepening crisis in the Tarai. As the stalemate continues, the NC may be paying a price in the Tarai for cohabiting with the Maoists in Kathmandu.



GUEST COLUMN
Sudhindra Sharma

The Madhes revolt of January 2007, in contrast to the people's movement of April 2006, was not led by a political party and wasn't cadre-based. It was fuelled by perceived wrongs and injustices rather than being motivated by an agenda, structure or program. It was popular movement that subsequently began to search for someone to lead it. Eventually, Madhesi figures of various hues tried to give it leadership.

The average Madhesi has a different take on the agenda of state restructuring. Opinion

surveys have repeatedly shown an overwhelming number of Madhesis are for Hinduism being the state religion and favour a multiple official language policy. There continues to be relatively more support for retaining the monarchy. They overwhelmingly support turning the unitary state into a federal one.

In contrast, Pahadis have only lukewarm support for federalism. A large proportion of Madhesis like to be identified simultaneously as a Nepali and as Madhesi. This bodes well for national integration, contrary to what many non-Madhesis tend to assume. The category 'Madhesi' after all, does not have any political significance on the other side of the border.

Kathmandu has responded to Madhesi concerns by addressing only issues permissible within the ambit of the state restructuring discourse. Other issues such as that of secularism continue to remain non-negotiable.

The animosity towards Kathmandu in the Madhes is in large measure due to the presence of the Maoists in the coalition government where many believe it is the Maoists who call the shots. Unfortunately for the Maoists, many in the Madhes continue to perceive them as alien atheists who are intent on imposing a godless ideology upon the rich religious and cultural traditions of the Tarai. This negative perception was reinforced when the Maoists inducted local criminals into their fold when they expanded

rapidly in the Tarai 2000-2005.

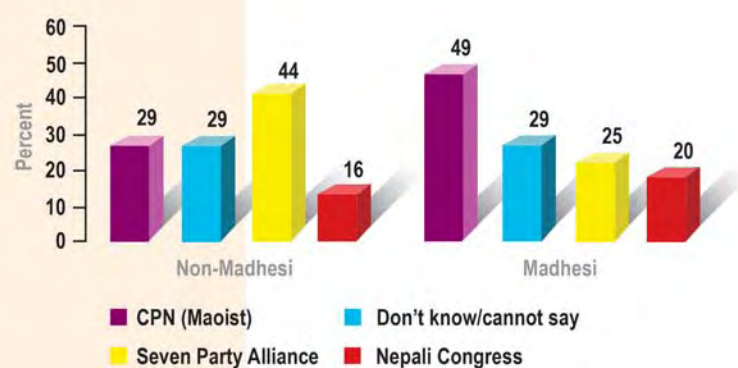
The disenchantment with the NC and UML, on the other hand, seems to be motivated by their perceived apathy towards Madhesi grievances. By flirting with the Maoists, the NC and UML seem to have overlooked the deep resentment the Madhesis have towards the Maoists.

The Madhes seems specially aggrieved towards the NC, a party that has historically had a soft-corner for the Tarai. NC leaders empathised with Madhesis, emulating them in their manners, dress, language and provided space for them within the party machinery. Many fondly remember how BP Koirala in 1960 projected Parsu Narayan Choudhary, a Madhesi-Janajati, as the next NC leader and prime minister-in-waiting. Choudhary, as others after him, hit the glass ceiling that prevented Tarai people from ascending the party ranks.

Just like UML cadre deserted en masse to the Maoists in the late 1990s, politicians and cadre have been abandoning the NC to join the new Madhesi front. In the short run this will be a serious setback for the NC in its vote bank as the constituent assembly elections approach. In the longer term, however, this very force could offer possibilities for a democratic front. ●

Sudhindra Sharma of Interdisciplinary Analysts was part of the team that conducted the Nepal Contemporary Political Situation-V public opinion poll in January 2008. ida(at)wlink.com.np

Who is guilty for the Constituent Assembly election not taking place? (Seven party alliance means six parties plus the Maoists)



INTERDISCIPLINARY ANALYSTS

The day of the pretenders

Stop posturing and get the elections over and done with

On 13 February the Maoists celebrated the 13th anniversary of their armed rebellion with pageantry befitting a proletarian party on the road to setting up a People's Republic.

Presumably, such a state will be patterned after North Korea. And our own President Dahal will be crowned Dear Leader. What Comrade Dahal doesn't



STATE OF THE STATE
C K Lal

realise is that nobody except his own YCL takes his presidential imaginings seriously. In fact, it has become a subject of ridicule.

The buzz in town is that royal representatives have succeeded in persuading the Indian establishment about the necessity of retaining some form of monarchy in Nepal. The high-power Congress-I delegation scoffed at the rumours, but there was no mistaking the body language of Digvijay Singh. After all,

he is Rajput blue blood himself and a representative of the Empress of India, Sonia Gandhi.

Immediately on arrival at an airport still named after Gyanendra's granddaddy, Diggy Raja told the media everyone had to negotiate in good faith. What we don't know is that on 24 April 2006 there may have been a quadrilateral deal between mainstream parties, the Maoists, the king and Indian mediators on the issue of monarchy. So Sujata Koirala's model of a Cultural Monarchy may not be out of the realm of possibility.

Baburam Bhattarai has once more urged royalists not to obstruct polls. His party will have to do more than that to ensure elections are held at all. "If the King is nationalist, he should help in the smooth conduct of the election," the comrade told a gathering. BP Koirala had said something similar prior to the Referendum in 1980. History proved how naïve he had been for not learning from history.

Almost every hereditary ruler of Nepal

since Jang Bahadur has bowed and scraped before imperial Calcutta and New Delhi to protect privileges. Kings and princes are pragmatic people: they know that nationalism is for the rabbles, not nobles.

Gyanendra knows that had the Indians not backed his grandfather, he would have been the king in 1950s. He also knows that almost every Rana prime minister and their progenies had to find shelter in India once their time was up. Clearly on the instigation of someone else, Gyanendra overplayed his hand with his power grab in 2005. But that doesn't mean he had shut his channels of communication with the Indians. It now looks like elections will not happen unless some space for the suspended king is found in the new scheme of things.

Koirala's Baby King formula is a non-starter. A Cultural Monarchy holds more promise. There are, after all, models of rulers without realms. It may be possible to make space for a ritual royal in the

interim constitution and allow His and/or Her Majesty to carry on with temple visits and pay taxes like everyone else.

Unless something is done double-quick on resolving this, 10 April will be another mirage. The list of political bigwigs doubting elections is looking impressive. Sher Bahadur Deuba says: "The elections cannot be held in the current fragile security situation." Shekhar Koirala concurs: "As the security situation is deteriorating, holding the polls is impossible."

Home Minister Krishna Prasad Situala warns that the country will be mired in crisis if elections are not held. Comrade Dahal threatens a "legal takeover" if polls are put off again.

All these worthies are talking at each other, not with each other. They need to be part of the solution rather than add to the cacophony of political gibberish. Do a secret deal on the monarchy if you have to, but stop posturing and get the election over and done with. ●

LETTERS

THE MONARCHY

One correction: the monarch in Cambodia does not have the prerogative of choosing his successor ('The Ranariddh option', Editorial, #386). This is done by a privy council kind of body. As Ranariddh was active in electoral politics and a criminal case was also being brought against him in a local court; he was obviously not eligible for the kingship. The council decided that Sihamoni was the best bet amongst the eligible princes. For reference, Sihanouk himself had relinquished the throne to his father in order to join electoral politics in the past.

Bishwa Nepal, email

● I liked your editorial. Your suggestion that king Gyanendra resign and his grandson continue as a ceremonial monarch would be, I think, the strategic move that could save the institution. Your other suggestion that he start a political party is also well taken. There is real danger that communists will occupy that 'nationalist' space - one that monarchy has occupied historically. It's certainly better for an ex-monarch to pose as a nationalist than to leave it to the communists. Unfortunately the biggest liability for monarchy continues to be king Gyanendra himself.

RP Bhattarai, email

● Don't you know that in a monarchical system kings can not be chosen by anyone but the king himself? You think that the support for monarchy is support for Paras or his son/daughter? ('Luxury condos', #386) When the present king is Gyanendra and people still support the continuation of this institution who do you think they are supporting? After all, weren't you saying a few months back that the monarchy has no more relevance in Nepal whatsoever?

Bhuwan Sharma, email

● While CK Lal has correctly analysed and said "the country burns, all in the name of republicanism" ('The games losers play', #386), wasn't it him who once openly advocated the king be overthrown and the people choose their own leaders? Therefore, since the present government has been formed following a campaign by people with views like yours and allegedly as per the aspirations of the Nepali people, maybe me and other people like me who never trusted these sleazy politicians to deliver are laughing at you fools now.

Prasanna KC, Kathmandu

MADHES

I agree with Prashant Jha in ('Missing the story', #386). The state media and even the big private national media have been reluctant to cover news which shows the real situation in the Tarai. The Tarai is burning, no question about it, and it is crucial that the government along with the nation's media consider the situation very seriously. The constituent assembly election is



very important, but unless the problems of the Tarai are addressed, the country cannot head toward the polls.

Amit Ranjan, email

● Prashantji, Madhesi have been marginalised for a long time, we agree. But sometimes the vehement and one-sided reaction from Madhesi intellectuals makes us worried. Regardless of their political leanings, they seem to disregard their responsibility in helping to search for viable options for resolution of the conflict. They could act as mediators between the opposing sides, but they are supporting the Madhesi movement without properly considering the characteristics of the politically active groups, both armed and unarmed. The issues raised by some of these groups are of course valid and important, but we also need to consider that other forces are irresponsibly exploiting these issues to serve their own interests. The Madhesi groups agitating against the mixed electoral system register are ready to contest the elections under the same system...do they really believe in their own demands or are the only making them for populist reasons?

Mahesh Acharya, Lalitpur

● I think Prashant Jha is not a journalist but a spokesman of the Madhesi parties. He should be honest at least in this regard so that the readers can make up their mind right from the beginning. *Nepali Times* seems to be aiding his efforts by providing a platform to propagate blatantly false accusations. What does he mean by saying that the Insec district head is a Pahadi? In his article he repeatedly pits Pahadi against Madhesi to stir up hatred between them.

The criminal gangs in the Tarai are killing innocent people, including journalists, just because of their origin. So how can they report properly on the atrocities? Even human rights monitors are targeted because they are not Madhesi. Prashant Jha justifies these actions. Regarding his remarks on the Gaur and Kapilvastu massacres, the human rights groups could not visit the sites immediately because of obstructions created by Madhesi criminal gangs - this is more than clear. A STF should have been mobilized long ago to control the criminal gangs in the Tarai but because of Girija and the Maoists' squabbling that did not happen, and so-called Madhesi 'parties' are now bargaining with a weak transitional government and threatening national unity. Had

there been no criminal gangs in the Tarai, these parties would not have tried to blackmail the government which everyone knows cannot take long-term decisions and has a mandate only to hold successful elections.

Abhi Karki, Pune

● Prashant Jha's monotonous ranting about the Tarai and blaming Pahadis for all the Tarai's problems is not what we need to hear during these sensitive times. The first paragraph of his article is too generalised and assumes too much. Not everyone in Kathmandu is insensitive to 'genuine' Madhesi issues. But if he is talking about the silence of civil society regarding a federal system with right to self-determination or an independent Tarai state then I think that a circumspect approach is appropriate, because it is a sensitive issue which has only arisen recently (it was not on the

agenda or mandate of the April revolution in 2006). The concept of a federal system with right to self-determination is premature at this stage. He doesn't want to acknowledge that the majority of Tarai people desire elections. Political parties which organise peaceful meetings have more legitimacy than criminal outfits with political cover who terrorise their own compatriots.

Anil Ghimire, email

POWER

Despite the potential for hydropower generation that could meet most of the country's power demand, Nepal suffers acute energy crisis. Your story on hydropower in Palpa ('Do it yourself', #385) highlights what we can do on our own. Even a small initiative of resource mobilization at a local level can bring massive benefit. At least Palpali people do not suffer the load-shedding which we now have to endure daily in Kathmandu. If

this story offers hope for the feasible solution to our power problem, we should opt for tapping power from small rivers and streams, and strengthening and empowering communities for the process at a local level rather than looking for time-consuming and expensive mega hydro-projects. After all, little drops of water make a mighty ocean.

Manisha Sharma, Kalanki

OUTSOURCING

Nepal requires an institutional framework not only for the outsourcing industry, but for the economy as a whole ('No outsourcing', #386). As for the service sector, investment in human capital is a grave necessity. Education, particularly higher education, is the need of the hour if Nepal wants to make a shift to becoming a service sector economy.

Amish Mulmi, email

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"In god's hands"

PARALYSED: Dikari Aire (left) looks up from her water bed. She has been bed-ridden since falling from a tree 22 years ago. Rama Aire (below) had a similar accident 20 years ago and is paralysed from the waist down. Both women were being cared for by the TEAM Hospital in Dadeldhura which was closed down by the government in December.



PICS: KUNDA DIXIT

The closing of a hospital is proof that politics kills people

KUNDA DIXIT in DADELDHURA

Dikari Aire lies flat on her stomach and raises her head as two visitors arrived to see her last week in the middle of a winter storm.

"You have taken the trouble to come to see me, I am so grateful," Dikari smiled weakly, bobbing on her water bed. One year after getting married, at age 18 she fell from a tree and broke her back. She has been a paraplegic for the last 22 years, looked after by the TEAM hospital in Dadeldhura.

In December, the hospital was shut down after the Health Ministry was pressured by Maoists who accused doctors of being "agents of American imperialism".

Thousands of patients like Dikari Aire from neighbouring Doti, Bajhang, Achham and Baitadi now have nowhere to go. Those with money take relatives to India for treatment. At least eight patients have died because they couldn't get emergency care after the hospital closed down.

"This is the most direct proof I have seen that politics kills people," says Deb Raj Joshi, a Dadeldhura trader, himself a patient.

The TEAM hospital was set up in 1960 at a time when it took 10 days to walk here from Dhangadi. It was the only hospital in the mountains of far-western Nepal and specialised in leprosy, TB and deliveries.

The maternal and child mortality rates in the far-west have improved, but there are still gaps. For instance, four percent of women here suffer from prolapsed uterus.

At the time it closed down, TEAM was treating up to 500 patients a day, and doing nearly 800 deliveries a year. Plans were underway for a Rs 30 million expansion.

The hospital's out-patient courtyard which used to be filled with patients and relatives was silent and empty last week. The wards and surgery theatre were padlocked. The rainwater system was still working, feeding water to overflowing tanks. A VSAT dish recently installed for telemedicine was not in use.

TEAM Dadeldhura was part of a string of missionary hospitals in Nepal which in 2002 were given five years to hand over to local management. The Nepali organization, Human Development and Community Service (HDCS) which runs hospitals in

Lamjung and Rukum was all set to take over Dadeldhura. But in December the agreement was terminated and the government said it would run the hospital itself.

Most people here are convinced the Maoists arm-twisted the Jana Morcha-run ministry not to allow HDCS to run the hospital. Health ministry officials and members of a parliamentary committee who came to investigate last month were locked up by angry locals. An agreement was nearly reached, but local Maoist commander, Comrade Pukar, sent a fax to Kathmandu saying the hospital would not be opened.

He accused the hospital of being run by 'imperialists' and argued that health services were the central government's prerogative and shouldn't be managed by NGOs.

"Is it because we are from the far west that Dadeldhura was punished?" asked TEAM medical assistant Madan Bhatt, who has no work. "Politicians in Kathmandu are fighting at the expense of the people."

In Kathmandu, Govinda Jha of the Health Services Department told *Nepali Times*: "TEAM didn't agree to work by the government's rules, it was their decision to close down. Besides, there is a district hospital that can take care of patients."

The Health Ministry did transfer three doctors from Bajhang and Bharatpur to Dadeldhura's district hospital in January. But last week there was only one doctor left, and there is so little trust in the government that there were few patients.

Dadeldhura's District Health Office even refused permission for Rs 2 million worth of TEAM medicines to be given to the sick. TB patients who need DOTS antibiotics and heart patients who need regular checkups aren't getting treatment.

Rama Aire is another paraplegic patient who has been cared for by the hospital for the past 20 years. She was abandoned by her family after her injury, and there is no one to take care of her with the hospital closed. Rama and Dikari used to earn money making bandages and knitwear for the hospital, now even that income is gone.

Says Rama: "My family and the government both abandoned me. The hospital used to take care of us, now it has closed down. We are now in god's hands." ●



Free drugs

Good idea, but needs monitoring

Health and education are the responsibility of the government. It is when government doesn't take this responsibility seriously that the private sector and charities step in to provide vital services.



COMMENT
Aruna Uprety

But this has brought with it a whole set of problems. The over-commercialisation of medical care is now a national epidemic. And it is to address this crisis in

the health sector that the government has announced, and the parliament has ratified, a free health care plan. It's a laudable and ambitious goal, but as with everything else in this country, implementation will be key. Unless properly monitored, free health care will not just be a burden on the government but may also foster corruption.

On a recent visit to hospitals in the far and mid-western region there was a discussion on the government's plan to give women money when they deliver babies in district hospitals. Sounded like a good idea, since only 15 percent

of women give birth in hospitals in Nepal and that number is even lower out west.

"Yes, we have the program but we had not been able to give the money because Kathmandu never sent it," was the comment from hospitals in Achham, Salyan and Doti. Many young mothers we spoke to in these districts said they had heard of the government initiative but hadn't gone to collect the money after delivery because it was too time-consuming and they weren't sure whether they would be handed the cash.

A few women who got money said that they had to wait for two extra days after the delivery because the accountant had gone home. Most of the money they did get was spent on food and lodging along the way.

No doubt without proper monitoring the government's free medical program could face a similar fate. There is a big risk

that the free medicines will be past their expiration dates, or of low quality. Last year in Dailekh we saw antibiotics and anti-inflammatory drugs made by dubious companies that looked like counterfeits. Local doctors said they knew the medicines were fake, but the administration said those were the only available drugs.

In Sankhuwasabha in the east, the deworming medicine Albendazole which costs 79 paisa per tablet was bought by the District Health Office for Rs 8 per tablet. Amoxicillin was bought for double the retail price. The government distribution network in Biratnagar bought Brufen for three times the market price and sent it to the health post. It may not seem like much, but with 676 health posts and 3,129 sub-health posts all over the country the leakage due to

corruption is huge.

It's not just the free medicine, how is the government going to ensure the availability of motivated and trained health workers? Even in Lalitpur district south of the capital, health post staff go to their stations only once a month to collect their salaries.

In Mugu last year we observed a health post that was running well, but that was because it was staffed by a voluntary group. But even here, the auxiliary nurse midwife didn't know that prolapsed uterus was a serious problem. No one had told her the women would be hesitant to volunteer information on such a sensitive affliction.

We'd all like to see the free medicine scheme work. But there are many hurdles, and it needs determination and integrity on the part of the government health delivery machinery. ●

Hospitals united



Hams hospital, Heritage Hospitals India and Smile Train have signed an agreement to become partner hospitals. Heritage Hospitals in India is a 250 bed multi-specialty hospital while Smile Train is an American foundation that runs programs in 71 countries all over the world to do free cleft lip and palate surgeries.

Power bonds

For the first time ever, Nepal Electricity Authority is issuing a seven percent power bond worth Rs 1.5 billion. These bonds will mature in five years and will be issued by Nepal Merchant Banking and Finance.

Women winners

The fourth edition of the Fair and Lovely VOW Top 10 College Women Competition concluded on 8 March at the Everest Hotel. The winners in the 10+2 category were Vatsala Shah, Jini Agrawal and Sumana Sharma; in the



Bachelors category were Sujan Gurung, Haushala Thapa and Sampada Malla and Anita Shrestha, Parikshya KC and Rooplata Sethia in the Masters category. Outstanding student of the year went to Richa Thapa.

Showy interiors



MacDecor's new showroom has opened up in Kopundol.

The building's six levels will provide not only local handmade products but also foreign products imported from China.

Breaking the deadlock

We need to rethink the way we negotiate

Last October, a vernacular newspaper reported that Ram Chandra Poudel, the Minister for Peace and Reconstruction, had spent a total of two months, out of the six months that he was in office, and tens of millions of public money to talk to 59 different disgruntled ethnic and political groups.



STRICTLY BUSINESS
Ashutosh Tiwari

Poudel's aim was to settle differences among the groups. But his success rate left much to be desired. Only four talks led to agreeable conclusions. All others ended in failure, leading to further protests, demonstrations and shutdowns all across Nepal.

With those results, it's tempting to dismiss Poudel, a senior politician, as a misfit who doesn't know the first thing about how to work for peace, let alone run a peace ministry. But that would be too limiting a view.

Given how frequently disagreements appear to break out among various groups in Nepal these days, and given how easily those disagreements escalate into full-blown public disorder, it's worth considering that there might be something fundamentally wrong with the way we have come to approach the process of negotiation in Nepal. It doesn't matter whether the negotiation is between political parties and ethnic groups or between the labour and management of a company. Our failure-prone template seems to run like this.

Trust taken lightly: Besides the news-hogging shortages of petrol, diesel, cooking gas and electricity in urban Nepal, there's a severe shortage of trust. Trust is hard to build up and it takes time to sustain, but it's easy to lose because of a few missteps. If only those



on one side of the table stopped making promises they know they cannot keep, or if they apologized when they failed to honour their commitments, much of our trust-related problems would go away. The problem starts when parties become eager to reach agreements and smile for the cameras even when they know that their steps ahead will start damaging trust-building exercises.

No clear rules of the game: Often, our parties do not take time to decide in advance what they will or will not accept in a negotiation. As a result, many of our negotiations become not a conversation to solve issues, but a way to buy time, continue to shift goal posts and paint the other side black for showing bad faith. This happens because the rules of the game get made up as parties go along. But it's only when a party is clear about what it will and will not agree to, that it will focus on what it can do. If most Nepali negotiations were publicly reframed to clarify what the non-negotiable rules are which all parties will adhere to, it

would help all to not waste time trying to deal with one another over continuously shifting goal-posts.

No neutral transparency: If you watch minister Poudel in press conferences after each negotiation, you will see that he's busy explaining what the other parties said or did not say. He seems to forget that his task is to make the government's case to the public, not summarise others' positions on television. By his actions, he unwittingly decreases the levels of transparency. As an antidote, he can have the minutes of most of his meetings published on a website. This way, people can judge the contents for what they are.

To be sure, every negotiation has its own particular dynamics that cannot be pre-determined by a formula. But given how much of the present government's time is taken up negotiating with various groups, only to fail again and again, a different thinking is required. Activities that build or repair trust, clarify what's negotiable and what's not, and promote transparency are likely to create a better negotiating climate in Nepal. ●

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"We couldn't fight forever"

Excerpts from an interview with CPN-M chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal in *Himal Khabarpatrika*, 13- 27 February

हिमाल
खबरपत्रिका

Is the CPN-M in a different place from where it was when the People's War began?

When the People's War started we had specific beliefs and strategies, but they have evolved, and we are now at a different place. Five years after the war started, we understood that we could not fight forever. That is why we made some changes to our strategies.

From reading Lenin's documents I understood that had he been alive a few more years, he would have also entered the multiparty system. Lenin's new financial policy was bourgeois. I am not trying to say that we are going against the beliefs we had when the People's War started. That would not be true. The truth is that the difference between the beliefs we had before the 10-year war and the belief system we follow now are very different. We say that they represent an evolution of principles and understandings.

So what were the reasons behind the People's War?

The poor, the farmers and the labourers in the rural areas are empowered. Women and communities that were hitherto discriminated against are also more aware. For the first time in the history of Nepal, thousands of women took up arms to transform our society. Over 2,500 women fought and sacrificed their lives for this change. Karnali, Seti, Mahakali and other regions became empowered. It took 10 years and the lives of over 10,000 Nepalis for us to reach where we are, to be talking about CA elections, a federal republic and proportional representation.

But didn't the armed groups we have now learn from the Maoist legacy of using violence as means for getting things done?

That would not be the right thing to say. The entire world knows and accepts that it is always the state that uses violent methods first. Violence means discrimination,

exploitation, oppression, and suppression. In Nepal as well, the state started using violence first.

So the present violence can be understood as resistance?

There are those who use violent resistance because there are millions of people to be represented, and no means remain other than violence. There are others who think they can use violence to get all their demands, even petty ones. Those who came with us learnt to fire guns, use bombs. Those who are spreading terror in the Tarai have the same weapon skills, but what they don't have is philosophy, a political work plan, or program that would include all groups. That is why it is necessary that we stop those who are spreading violence in the Tarai. Because we Maoists are a strong group, it is our moral and physical responsibility to stop them. If we are given the responsibility to run the state, we will use constitutional means to stop them.

Many violent activities have taken place against your orders.

Rebellion is a historical necessity, but one should not be cruel to the people. In the past we have learnt from our mistakes and taken actions against the guilty in our party. We took action against those responsible for the Madi incident, but some fled the country.

Those groups, including the JTMM, that are spreading violence in the Tarai are the by-products of the Maoists.

Jwala Singh was our scribe, and member of our party's district committee. He used to ally with the chief district officer and threaten our party activists. We took actions against him when we understood that he had been involved in suspicious activities. However, I think Goit is a political person and a senior leader. His popularity came when he spoke at a council meeting during the ceasefire. He was made the president of the Madhesi Mukti Morcha because he is quite charismatic. However, when Matrika was made the president at a meeting in Patna, Goit felt slighted. Right after that the state of emergency was declared and we could not contact him for four months. We heard that he was quite



MIN RATNA BAJRACHARYA

confused and nervous at that time and took violent means. Goit can still think politically, but Jwala Singh is not like that.

Does violence have space in the political future of Nepal?

Nepalis fought a war, and they won, but a battle is still left. The feudal class won't let go unless there's a final push. They know that they will lose their identity after the CA elections, which is why they are trying their best to conspire against the elections. They are capable of violence and the people may have to use force against them. The international community understands that the left is becoming strong in Nepal, and they are trying their best to incite violence to stop that. We should take the violence in the Tarai as a sign that they are becoming stronger. If the violence increases in the Tarai, the people will again have to rise up and use force.

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Splintered

Biplav Bhattarai in *Nepal*,
17 February

नेपाल
ILAM—After the police detained two Limbuwan Mukti Morcha workers on charges of forcing ‘donations’ from people on the Mechi highway, the transport system came to a standstill for five days. The police arrested 30 more people from Ilam and Jhapa, while the Limbuwan state council vandalised a dozen vehicles for defying their strike.

The Limbuwan activists have made it compulsory for vehicles travelling on the Mechi highway to have ‘Limbuwan state’ imprinted on them, and some offices, including the Dharan municipality, now have boards in Limbu language. The increasing activities of Limbuwan activists in the eastern hills are likely to affect the CA polls. The Limbuwan state council has been calling for strikes demanding proportional election procedures and the establishment of a self-governing Limbuwan region.

Talks with the government have broken down three times without any resolution. The third round of talks was stopped when the government announced that provinces will only be announced after the polls. Since then the east has been under immense pressure.

The Limbuwan movement is led by Kumar Lingden and Sanjuhang Palungwa, who were expelled from the Janamukti Paty for speaking against the royal takeover. They established the Federal Democratic National Forum on 11 December 2005 but have not worked together since the establishment of the federal Limbuwan state council.

The Federal Democratic National Forum has been registered for the elections.

General Secretary Lingden says, “We registered for the elections because we believe that talks can solve our problems. We want to solve the existing problems through the CA polls.”

Although Palungwa and Lingden do not belong to the same party anymore, both have the same agenda and the same demands. They demand that the nine easternmost districts of the country be declared a Limbuwan state. While those associated with Palungwa have stopped forcing people to make ‘donations’ in the name of taxes until further notice, the Lingden activists still haven’t changed their ways.

Helpless NEA

Editorial in *Naya Patrika*,
13 February

दैनिक पत्रिका
The daily eight hours of load shedding puts the country to sleep early, lets people sleep till late and makes people lazy and unproductive. The future looks even bleaker: we will apparently have to wait four years until these power cuts end.

On being questioned by the finance committee of the parliament, the Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA) repeated that the load shedding will have to continue until the completion of the upper Tamakosi hydropower project. Regardless of the long talks with India about purchasing electricity, the NEA has no substantive plans to reduce the power cuts. This clearly shows how irresponsible and incompetent the NEA is.

Although there are no signs of immediate reductions in power cuts, the 40 megawatt deal with India could provide some relief. However, NEA has done nothing to set up a private company to distribute power.

The reduced production of

electricity is not the only reason for the increase in load shedding. Water levels in the rivers have decreased while even the little electricity produced cannot be used efficiently. Leakage is endemic. The unnecessary consumption of electricity by those with money and status has further aggravated the problem. If the government delays the implementation of the electricity purchase agreement, and does nothing to speed up the hydropower projects, not only will the success of the NEA be questioned but the government will have a hard time saving face.

Team India

Ghatanara Bichar, 13 February

सप्तमः खिद्यार
Nepal can always depend on India to help in a political crisis. A high level Indian delegation arrived in Kathmandu on the invitation of the NC this Tuesday. Although the delegation headed by the General Secretary of Congress, Digbijaya Singh, is allegedly here to discuss an array of political issues, political analysts believe they are here to solve the Madhes crisis. The delegation met with the home minister and the peace and reconstruction minister on Tuesday and is scheduled to meet the leaders of various political parties. The delegation will fly back to New Delhi after their meeting with the prime minister on Thursday.

The delegation has told the political parties that there are no alternatives to the CA polls. They will talk to the Madhesi leaders on Wednesday. Analysts believe that the discussions between the Indian delegation and the Madhesi leaders will have an important influence on the political situation of the country.



President Comrade Prachanda, Red Salute

हिमाल खबरपत्रिका
Robin Sayami in *Himal Khabarpatrika*, 13 - 27 February

QUOTE OF THE WEEK



“When I met with Nepal Army officers and soldiers a few days ago, they said that CPN-M is a true party and that they will cast their votes for us. And even though they cannot announce it publicly, Nepal Police officers have also told us the same.”

Maoist chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal speaking at Khula Manch on Wednesday at the 13th Anniversary of The People’s War, quoted in *Kantipur*, 14 February.



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THE ORIGINAL INTERNATIONAL SHOPPING EXPERIENCE

When smoke spews out of the chimney, the brick factory comes alive.

TEXT AND PICTURES BY SAM KANG LI

The dry season starts from November, but it will not last. To make the most of it, workers, usually Indians and rural Nepalis, toil in 24-hour shifts. Just above them, a flag carrying the symbol of Hanuman flies in the wind. It will bless them with strength, a factory owner says. They might as well be blessed with speed too, for time is also critical. Each day, the kiln gobbles up 50,000 rupees worth of coal. Slow production means greater losses.

The main ingredients though, soil and water, cost next to nothing. Both are found on the very same land

that the chimney sits on. They are mixed - by hands and feet - to form mud, which is cast into bricks and left to harden in the sun for several days. Once hardened, they are moved to the kiln to be baked at high temperatures for hours, gaining a reddish tint in the process. Above the kiln, workers stand amid hot air escaping the vents to seek warm comfort in the winter chill, some even topless.

Nearby, trucks wait to be loaded with bricks ready for sale, even as another buyer drops by to place an order at the nearby office. For the workers, the same cycle simply repeats, until the first monsoon rains fall in April and wash the dust off their faces. ●



Asses, often guided by young children considered too weak to work, are used to transport heavier loads.

“People use the three Ds to describe this kind of work. Dirty, Difficult, Dangerous.”

- Brick factory manager
Bharat Surendh

Bricks are laid out to dry after being cast. A single kiln can produce up to 70, 000 bricks a day. Each brick is sold for Rs 3.5.





Smoke and dust



An Indian child worker takes a puff while waiting for the next truck to fill with bricks. Indians and rural Nepalis provide cheap labour for the factories.

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Children are a common sight at brick factories because both parents work, often on the same site. Most of them will never receive proper education.

A worker wets soil with water drained from nearby streams to form mud for moulding bricks.



Work continues even when dark, as the factory makes the most out of the dry season. Rain wets the bricks and makes them unstable.

Flood gates closed

Government preparing new laws on inter-country adoption

Following the exposure of a market in 'orphans' and the taking away of children without their birth parents' consent in Nepal's poorly regulated adoption process last year, the Ministry of Women Children and Social Welfare, headed by a Maoist minister, suspended inter-country adoption.

The ministry stopped processing files, and those awaiting final signature from the ministry were sent back to the District Administration Office.

Embassies stopped issuing visas, and the ministry said that nothing would move until the inter-country adoption

process is altered to make it similar to the adoption policies in other countries.

When international adoption from Nepal was stopped, there were over 400 families awaiting final signature from the ministry who could not take their children with them. The indefinite halt meant that some parents started camping out in Kathmandu, adoption forums like Nchild and Adoption Nepal started filling up with stories of the children left behind, pleas for information and open letters to senators and to the ministry in Nepal.

When the Maoists left the government

in September, the families who were awaiting response thought that things might change in their favour. However, it was only after much pressure from the US and European governments, and months of deliberation and debate that the government decided to ease the ban for the 400-plus families whose files were pending at the ministry.

Three months since the decision was made, the ministry is in the process of approving the few files that are now left from the original 400. "Inter-country adoption is still suspended," says the ministry's legal officer Prakash Adhikari,

adding, "the ministry only has a mandate to process the 400 or so pending files, and we are in the final stages." He said that once the process is complete the ministry would focus on the new policy on adoption.

Gyan Lama at the Kathmandu's district administration office, who was on the review committee to draft the new set of policies says it will be more transparent and specific in terms of regulations for inter-country adoption. The new set of policies was sent to the Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, which sent it back to the Ministry of Women Children and Social Welfare with recommendations, but when the minister resigned in September the process was stopped. Although the ministry has a new minister, the new set of policies will not be ready before elections on 10 April. ● (Mallika Aryal)



SAM KANG LI

Mushrooming orphanages

The use(lessness) of children's homes in Nepal

WILKO VERBAKEL and
SUSAN VAN KLAVEREN

Setting up an orphanage is a popular activity in Nepal among Western NGOs. There are now over a thousand orphanages in the country, and over 400 in the Kathmandu Valley. If each of them houses 30-40 children then in the valley alone around 15,000 children must live in such institutions.

Only a small portion of these children are really orphans. A USAID study among 350 'orphanages' in Nepal showed that only 20 percent of the 8,821 children surveyed had no parents while over 50 percent still had both parents. Many apparent orphans live on the street because their parents cannot afford to feed them

properly, but NGOs should question if these homes really contribute to reducing poverty.

'Orphans' become adults

It seems a noble venture to bring poor street children to a children's home, but is it really an advantage for them to live there in the long run? They grow up without family ties or knowledge of their own caste/ethnic background, both of which are important social nets in Nepal, and come eighteen they are left to fend for themselves. There has not been much research into how well young adults can cope with this situation, but there is a high risk that they will have difficulty sustaining themselves and have a higher risk of suffering from identity crisis and behavioural problems than those brought up in a family and

community environment.

Donations

Typical costs for food, lodging, clothing and education for an 'orphan' are at least Rs 3,000 per child per month, and land and construction prices in Kathmandu are also considerable. These costs are met by donors who want to contribute to poverty reduction, but children's homes will never ultimately bring about poverty reduction because they will never become self-sustainable.

Many village people want their children in children's homes as there they will get a chance to go to a good school, but instead of bringing children to a school far away from their village, NGOs could more efficiently invest in improving rural education. With an investment of Rs 100,000 per

year for extra teachers at a local school all children in the village would benefit, while this amount only covers the expenses of two children in a children's home.

From business to criminal activities

For some Nepalis, running an orphanage is a type of business. Some children are bought from their families for a few thousand rupees and then sold at higher rates to an orphanage. Illegal adoption is another profitable form of trade, and some foreigners have been found paying thousands of euros to children's homes to adopt an 'orphan'. Financial abuse by the management of children's homes is widespread. For instance, last year a Dutch family lost thousands of euros when the

director of Ganjala Children Home ran away with their donation money. Despite complaints lodged with the Social Welfare Council and Children's Welfare Board, the home was reregistered as 'Peace and Beautiful' and continues to exploit well-meaning sponsors.

Some orphanages serve as cover-ups for even worse practices. Last year, a Dutch orphanage director was jailed after it was found that he sexually abused almost all children in his home. Paedophilia is a very serious issue that the Nepali government needs to address by implementing strict rules and improved monitoring.

Responsibility of donors

Who is responsible if an orphanage fails? Who will be held responsible if the children are abused, or end up on the street when the orphanage goes bankrupt? NGOs and their donors have a moral responsibility for the spending of their donations. If relatives are too poor to feed or educate the kids, donors should question whether placing the child in an orphanage is the best solution. Contributing to support the family – not by giving cash, but by providing means to generate income – can help it to afford to feed all its members and send the children to school. The money spent on one child in an orphanage per year (400-750 euro) is enough to support several families in this way.

Having some orphanages to cater for abandoned children is helpful, but 1,000 is really too many. Those who want to help Nepal should think of the long term effects of a project: for them it is a satisfying hobby, but for the beneficiaries it determines their future. The best projects address the causes of a problem, and aim at self-sustainability. Only then can they truly help to break the vicious circle of poverty. ●

Wilko Verbakel and Susan van Klaveren are board members of a Dutch NGO, the International Council for Friends Of Nepal (ICFON). More information, and an extended version of the article can be found on www.icfon.nl.

The grass is always greener

Dining out in Singapore, chances are the waiters will all be Nepali students on internships

SHEERE NG in SINGAPORE

Krishna sits quietly in a corner, earnestly taking down notes written on the board. Together with him are 20 other Nepali students paying close attention to their lecturer.

It seems like an ordinary class on an ordinary school day, except that he is at least a decade older than his classmates, and the setting is 5,000km away from his home in Nepal. The 37-year-old flew to Singapore a year ago and has spent a total of Rs 350,000 in order to study hotel management in a private school here.

The number of Nepalis studying tourism and other related subjects in Singapore has continued to increase in recent years. The country is particularly a popular study destination for Nepalis because many of its colleges issue internationally-recognised certificates, which make it easier to apply for further studies in Europe and North America than if they applied straight from Nepal.

Singapore also has an abundance of employment opportunities and a relatively good average wage. Tourism courses are especially popular because they offer both the chance to get a good qualification and, as they include On the Job Training (OJT), the opportunity to work and earn money.



TIME OFF: Nepali tourism students in a rare moment as customers rather than waiters.

Most tourism students on OJT earn about Rs 260 per hour as waiters at restaurants and hotels. Even though this money can only offset part of the large expenses they incur in coming to Singapore, most see the hardship as worth bearing for the prospect of a brighter future.

Mani Prasad, a student at the Tourism Management Institute of Singapore, says: “My parents have made a big investment to help me be financially independent.” He is working as a trainee but finds it harder than he expected to meet his everyday expenses.

Together with his cousin, he rents a room at Little India hostel in central Singapore. Besides them, there are more than 20 other Nepali students staying in the hostel, with three to five of them crowded into each room. He can’t afford to go out very much, so to pass the time he stays in the room and watches DVDs. He’s not sure what he should do next: “I might take another course, go to another country or head back home. Nothing is fixed yet,” he says.

Binod, another hotel management student, studied mass communications in Nepal and aspires to be a journalist. Currently working as a waiter on his OJT period, he has applied to study journalism at another school after his course finishes. If his application is successful, he will be one step closer to his dream, but he will also have to fork out another large sum of money for the school fees. When asked if he would return to Nepal, he nods his head without hesitation. “But only when I have name and fame,” he adds.

Many Nepalis in Singapore have spent most or all of their savings to come here. Krishna had originally wanted to go to the US or Canada but despite the fact he holds a degree from Tribhuban University, both his applications were rejected. Singapore was a more reachable destination for someone of his means.

“My friends said Singapore has many hotels, easier to find a job,” he says. Having faced many difficulties to make ends meet as a student, he has now managed to secure a work permit to begin after his course, which will allow him to work full-time and earn between Rs 50,000-65,000 per month.

He is currently satisfied with his situation, but he still hasn’t forgotten his dream: to try again for America or Canada. But his life-plan, like many other Nepalis in Singapore for now, is to stay put until the chance comes up to move to greener pastures. ●

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Epicentre Kathmandu

Kathmandu ranks #1 as the city most vulnerable to earthquakes

Kathmandu has ranked first in a study of cities most vulnerable to earthquakes, followed by Istanbul, Delhi, Quito, Manila, and Islamabad.

When it comes to earthquakes, a magnitude 6.0 rumble in San Francisco may shake the same as a 6.0 in Delhi. But you're far more likely to die in India. Blame that mortality spread on exponential population growth, increasing poverty, and lax or non-existent building codes. In short: poor nations run far greater risk of fatalities than rich ones.

GeoHazards International, a nonprofit research group aiming to reduce suffering due to natural disasters, measured the lethal potential of seismic disasters facing small and large cities in Asia and the Americas—areas most at risk for seismic calamity. The sample cities spanned both developed and developing countries. Variables measured: building frailty, potential for landslides and fires, and the rescue, firefighting and life-saving medical abilities of local authorities.

The only first-world cities on the list were in Japan: Tokyo, Nagoya and Kobe. Fatalities in these cities were estimated in the hundreds, not the thousands.

Events since then show the estimates to be fairly accurate, if not low. The magnitude 7.6 quake that struck the Kashmir region of Pakistan in October 2005 killed more than 73,000 people, many in remote parts of the country, not dense urban

centers like Islamabad.

GeoHazard's study predicted a 6.0 hit on Pakistan's capital would kill 12,500 people.

GeoHazards warned the problem would become worse, citing a study of estimated earthquake fatalities based on population growth and construction changes in northern India. One scary finding: A magnitude 8.3 earthquake striking Shillong might kill 60 times as many people as were killed during a similar size quake that hit in 1897, even though the population of the region has increased by only a factor of about eight since then. Reason: The replacement of single-story bamboo homes with multistory, poorly constructed concrete-frame structures, often on steep slopes, has made the population much more vulnerable.

The opposite has happened over the last century in developing nations. Building codes have improved in earthquake-prone regions, as have preparations for disasters. Populations have grown in urban areas, to be sure, but at nothing like the rates in third-world cities, where an influx of rural poor has created increasingly dense living arrangements.

Economic impacts from earthquakes are radically different as well. GeoHazards finds the cost of the 1994 California earthquake was about 1 percent of the regional gross domestic product, and the cost of the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake was only about 0.2 percent of the regional GDP.

By contrast, he pegs cost of the 1972 Nicaragua earthquake at 40 percent of that country's entire GDP, and the cost of the 1986 El Salvador earthquake at 30 percent of that country's GDP. ● (FORBES)



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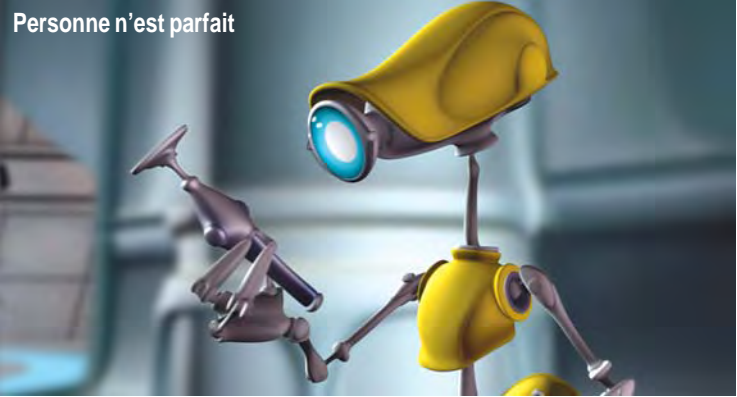
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Voyages through film

Kathmandu is no stranger to film festivals. From documentaries at Film South Asia to Aussie flicks at the Australian Film Festival, the Valley has been host to almost every genre of film. This time around, it is Alliance Française and the Candid Society who will be presenting **Voyages en courts**, featuring 43 short films from eight countries. Short films are often regarded as amateur work by fledgling filmmakers but the best short films manage to capture the intensity and emotional spectrum of the feature length film without sacrificing anything to the short time span.

The 43 films have been put into four categories. One category, Elles, is by invitation only. The screenings will take place at the Nepal Tourism Board from 22-25 February. Entrance is free.

Here are some of the films we thought look most promising:

World shorts, 22 February, 6PM
Pretul inocentei (Le prix de l'innocence)
A young girl is turned into merchandise by her own dehumanised parents who hope to escape poverty by selling their children. Not every child is born to be free, some have to fight to gain freedom.

Mésaventures d'un jour (Misadventures of a day or life is not a margarine ad):
This animated short takes a hilarious look at the ups and downs of everyday life where the characters turn into representations of their behaviour. The boss becomes an over-the-top Bush when he gets too bossy and Luiza, the main character, turns into a dragon when he gets angry. The use of animation reveals the masks we all put on and the film sways to a Brazilian beat soundtrack.

Strange shorts, 23 February, 5PM
Personne n'est parfait (Nobody's Perfect)
ZERO1 is a cleaning robot and is suddenly beset by the appearance of strange stains around his work place. Certain that he cannot have missed the stains, he is certain that they are a practical joke by his friends. And to get his own back, he's going to give them a hard time about it.

Overtime
Little ragdolls come to life only to find their maker dead in his studio. Unable to understand what truly happened they try to get back to their daily life without him.

Clermont-Ferrand 2006, 24 February, 5PM
Be Quiet

On their journey home, a Palestinian boy and his father are affected by the tensions of a politically charged and militarised reality; an atmosphere that serves to make the struggles of a father bringing up his son even harder.

Un beau matin (One Fine Morning)
In a quiet little town two men, a student and a photographer, learn that their pets do not correspond to new government regulations. They agree, albeit reluctantly, to sacrifice their pets to comply with the regulations, but soon find out that the regulations extend to more than cats and dogs.

Playground shorts, 25 February, 5PM
Le manie-tout
Ten-year old Martin takes a new shortcut through a mysterious alley to get to his new school. On the way, a strange old man signals to him from behind a dusty window. This man, Manitous, is able to make Martin's satchel come to life. And for the intrigued Martin, a whole new world where everything imaginary and wishful comes to life is opened.

Marrotes
Céline's parents leave her alone for a few days with her two brothers. During her parents' absence, she meets Valentin, a young, unstable boy given to violent spells. Their games and backgrounds differ vastly but create a mixture of mutual curiosity and fear.

The Candid Society will also be conducting workshops on the short films. 4241163, www.alliancefrancaise.org.np.



No short shrift for shorts

Short films rarely get the respect as their feature-length brethren, passed over for distribution and often merely accompanying longer pieces in festivals. Yet it is with shorts that filmmakers most freely explore their craft, taking on stories and ideas they might not attempt in longer projects. In 'Voyages en Courts,' a short film festival by Alliance Française, this medium gets the attention it deserves.

The 'World Shorts' program assembles six international short films. Among them is Diane Igrimbabazi's *Goretti*, one of the few documentary entries, a poignant portrayal of 16 year-old Dushimimana Goretti, a Rwandan AIDS orphan who is left to care for her younger siblings. Her narration is articulate, and all the more heart-wrenching for its monotonous delivery. Closing the programme is the Thai entry Araya Suriharn's *Pillow Talk*, a hilarious and raunchy black comedy about a woman who



CRITICAL CINEMA
A Angelo D'Silva

cannot find satisfaction in her marriage so takes up with a phone repairman. It is a tone-perfect comedy and saves a clever twist till late on, leaving you cackling through the credits.

Alice Winocour's *Kitchen*, impeccably securing the absurd dread a woman experiences at the presence of a pair of live lobsters she is attempting to cook, is the highlight of the 'Strange Programme'. Though this programme is also home to a couple of pieces that seem more about special effects and computer wizardry than story and character, it is sense of mood the rest manage to conjure, from the dreamlike to the creepy, that ties them together.

The true gee-whiz entry, however, belongs in the 'Clermont-Ferrand 2006' program. There you will find *Carlitopolis* by Luis Nieto, a film where Nieto conducts 'experiments' on a mouse, including inflating it like a balloon with a straw. This program is consistently strong. The French director Yann Chayia quite effectively captures his continent's anxieties about its aging population in his film *Men from Outer Space*. It is a comic take on zombie films, smartly exploiting the tropes of the genre, where the elderly are invading the homes of their more youthful counterparts. A politically incorrect premise, but with a satisfying ending. Here we also find the unpretentious *Sun in Winter* by Samuel Collardey, truly a cinematic gem. Smartly edited, it is an evocative and touching portrait of the friendship of two regular guys that says a lot simply by allowing its characters to be themselves.

'Playground Shorts,' ostensibly for the younger audience, trades in some heavy themes, including death, isolation and race. It is refreshing to see children as an audience treated seriously, but the category does seem to be rather arbitrary. *Fond de Teint*, for instance, realistically captures a very young child grappling with race in a culture where he appears different from his peers. It has a kind of credibility that is fascinating, but it is difficult to see a child directly relating to it, especially as the mother is as much of the subject as her son. Besides, I imagine you would be hard-pressed to find a child who would be able to follow the English subtitles that most of the films here have. That aside, the program includes the mature, moving animation *Marottes* by Benoît Razy Adults and Xavier de Choudens' charming *00h17*. Those entries, and most of the festival, adults should have no trouble enjoying. ●

Voyages en Courts runs from 22-25 February at the Nepal Tourism Board.

Presented by Alliance Française in Kathmandu & Candid Society & promoted by Nepal Tourism Board

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ABOUT TOWN

EXHIBITIONS

- ❖ **Remains of a smile** sculptures and prints by Jamal Alafaghani, 11AM-5PM, 17-28 February, at Siddhartha Art Gallery, Babar Mahal Revisited.
- ❖ **Metamorphosis** paintings by Christian Salzgeber, 15 February-9 March, at the Indigo Gallery.
- ❖ **Design show** with Kripa Joshi and others at the Pulchok Bakery Café, curated by photo.circle, until 29 February.
- ❖ **Tibetan Lhosar photographs** by Daniel Collins at the Saturday Café, Boudhanath stupa, until 31 March.

EVENTS

- ❖ **Taare Zameen Par** a film by Aamir Khan, 15 February, 5.30 PM at the Lazimpat Gallery Café. 4428549
- ❖ **American Gangster** with Denzel Washington and Russel Crowe, 5.30 PM, 16 February at the Lazimpat Gallery Café. 4428549
- ❖ **Bingo Nights** at the Welcome Food Plaza, Darbar Marg, starts 6PM every Monday. 2337201
- ❖ **Play and Learn** German at the German Info and Culture Centre, Thamel. 4700832
- ❖ **Toastmasters** a communication and leadership program, organised by Kathmandu Toastmasters Club every Wednesday 6PM at Industrial Enterprise Development Institute (IEDI) building, Tripureswor. 4288847

MUSIC

- ❖ **Classical music concert** with Steve Gorn and Homnath Upadhaya, fifty tickets at Rs 1,200 each, 6.45-9PM, 16 February at the Indigo Gallery. 4413580
- ❖ **Electronica** with DJ DannyCool from Ukraine, 8PM, 15 February at JBar, Thamel. 4418209
- ❖ **Ciney Gurung** every Wednesday and Rashmi Singh every Friday, live at the Absolute Bar, Hotel Narayani Complex, 7PM. 5521408

DINING

- ❖ **Rekindle the romance** with love songs by Ciney Gurung and a three course meal with a glass of wine, 7PM on 14 February at Shambala Garden Café, Hotel Shangri-la, Rs 999 per person. 4412999
- ❖ **Greek food festival** with chef Georios Vagionas, 7PM, 15-29 February at The Café, Hyatt Regency. 4491234
- ❖ **Continental and Chinese** cuisine and complimentary fresh brewed coffee after every meal a Zest Restaurant and Bar, Pulchok.
- ❖ **Illy espresso coffee** at the Galleria cafe, every Friday espresso cocktails.
- ❖ **International four course buffet** at the Sunrise Café with a range of Boris' signature dishes at The Chimney, Hotel Yak and Yeti. 4248999
- ❖ **Wine and Cheese** every Friday and Saturday at the Rox Bar, Hyatt Regency, 5-8PM. 4491234
- ❖ **Jazz in Patan** with coffee, food, drinks and dessert at the New Orleans Cafe, Jawalakhel. 11.30 AM-10PM. 5522708
- ❖ **Saturday special** barbeque, sekuwa, momos, dal-bhat at The Tea House Inn, Windy Hills, Nagarkot every Saturday. 9841250848.
- ❖ **Dice-licious brunch** at Kakori, Soaltee Crowne Plaza, roll the dice to the number of the day and get 50% discount on an individual meal, Saturdays and Sundays, 12.30-3.30 PM. 4273999
- ❖ **Scrumptious wood fired pizzas**, cocktails and specialty coffees at Roadhouse, Bhatbateni 4426587, Pulchok 5521755 and Thamel 4260187.
- ❖ **Cocktails and jazz** with the JCS Quartet and a choice of cocktails at Fusion – the Bar at Dwarika's. 4479448
- ❖ **Starry night barbecue** at Hotel Shangri-la with Live performance by Ciney Gurung, Rs. 666.00 nett. per person, at the Shambala Garden, every Friday 6.30 PM onwards. 4412999
- ❖ **Kebabs and curries** at the Dhaba, Thapathali. 9841290619
- ❖ **Calcutta's rolls, biryani, kebabs** Indian cuisine at Bawarchi, Bluebird Mall Food Court. 9741000735
- ❖ **Lavazza coffee** Italy's favourite coffee at La Dolce Vita, Thamel. 4700612
- ❖ **Little Britain coffee shop** fresh organic coffee, homemade cakes, WiFi internet, open all day, everyday. 4496207
- ❖ **Pizza** from the woodfired oven at Java, Thamel. 4422519

GETAWAYS

- ❖ **Relax Package** with a one night stay, full buffet breakfast at The Café and access to Club Oasis at Hyatt Regency, until 29 February, Rs 5,000 plus taxes, valid only for Nepalis and local residents. 4489800
- ❖ **Fulbari Resort and Spa, Pokhara** Rs 10,999 for Nepali double, \$219 for expat double, two days and three nights package, with transportation from the airport, drinks, tennis and swimming, discounts on food and beverages.
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For inclusion in the listing send information to editors(at)nepalitimes.com

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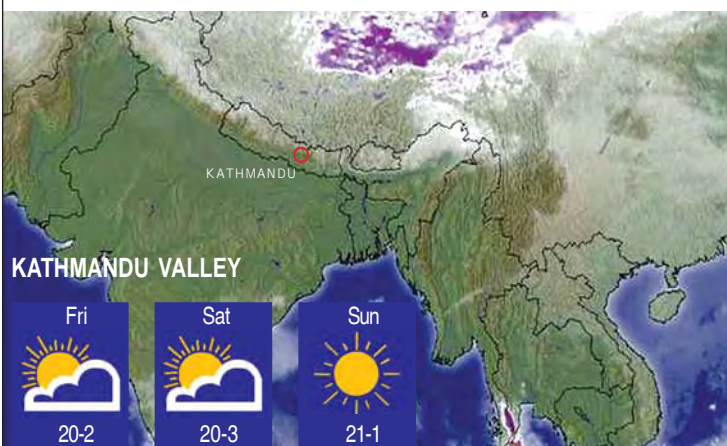
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WEEKEND WEATHER

by NGAMINDRA DAHAL

Meteorological records indicate that we are moving towards a drier winter climate. This year, the Valley has received only a third of its winter precipitation quota. We are already half-way through February and it is unlikely that we'll receive the remaining 17mm that should fall in the wintertime. Satellite pictures taken on Wednesday afternoon show a clear and cloud-free Nepal sky. The Tibetan plateau to the north is lashed by blizzards while north India has a big high pressure. This weekend, expect no big change in the weather except warmer days and cooler mornings.

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MIN RATNA BAJRACHARYA

WITHOUT END: Motorcycles, micros, buses and cars locked in yet more queues for fuel in front of Bhadrakali.



KIRAN PANDAY

SHOWING THE WAY: PM Koirala accompanies the Norwegian prime minister Erik Solheim during his visit to Nepal this week.



KIRAN PANDAY

FULL REGALIA: A sea of red at the Maoist rally to mark the 13th anniversary of the start of the People's War, Wednesday.



MIN RATNA BAJRACHARYA

INTRIGUED: Maoist cadres arrived in Kathmandu for the rally watch Nepal Army soldiers practising for Shiva Ratri at Tundikhel.

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It's a circus out there

Everything they say in travel guides about Nepalis being a peace-loving and gentle people is true. In any other country they'd have set fire to gas stations and hijacked diesel tankers by now.

Our drivers wait for 12 hours in a petrol queue, and they are still laughing away and playing **chungi** in the middle of the road. And when they are told the pump has run out of gas just as they get to within a stone's throw of it, do they run amok and go on an arson spree? Nope. They shrug their shoulders and head back to homes which have no power and no electricity.



There are a lot of reasons why there is no gas in the pumps (except for 'd' none of the points below are made up):

- a) NOC owes IOC so the Indians are doing to us what Gazprom is doing to the Ukrainians
- b) NOC is exacting revenge on the people for not being allowed to raise prices
- c) Dealers are hoarding because of the Madhesi blockade of the capital's highway lifeline
- d) This is part of Nepal's commitment to the Kyoto protocol to reduce our carbon footprint by cutting fossil fuel use to 1990 levels
- e) Tuesday was a Dhading Banda
- f) The Prithvi Highway was blocked on Monday by youths angry that their

- friends were in police custody for robbery
- g) A tanker broke its axle at the entrance to the Thankot petroleum depot, and blocked 34 other tankers from entering the facility. NOC refused to pay for a crane which sat there for three days.
- f) And now tanker drivers are on strike.



A gas shortage is a **great leveller**. The more dependent you are on the fossil economy the more badly hit you are. So for 95 percent of Nepalis who don't own vehicles of any type, there is no direct impact. And only 35 percent of Nepal's population is hooked to the grid, so a majority of the population couldn't be bothered about load-shedding and in fact must be saying khuching to the rest of us. This is the revenge of the powerless.

There is a shortage of just about everything in this country: electricity, water, gas, kerosene, diesel, CDMA phones, SIM cards. The latest is that Rastra Bank has run out of bank notes. Yes, in case you hadn't noticed, there is a shortage of **cash** in this country.



However, there is never any shortage of alcohol in the market. We never run out of **booze**. And pharmaceuticals. The Ass

has yet to hear of the neighbourhood pharmacy running out of drugs. (In Chitwan, a distillery has just widened its product range to also manufacture medicines to treat liver ailments.) And how come we never hear of a cigarette scarcity in this country?



At the annual function of Nepal Telecom recently, its CEO got away with severe criticism of politicians. Must have taken a lot of guts since the guest-in-chief was none other than Maharababu. The comrade listened attentively to the man, who really let himself go since this is the end of his term. But grapevine has it that CEO in question has already been granted an extension because of generous campaign funding to the right quarters. Is that why the minister was mum? So when are we actually going to be able to make a proper phone call on **Tero** mobile?



While the first Maoist election campaign speech by none other than Comrade El Presidente himself was getting going at Khula Munch, the Army was staging its Shivaratri rehearsal just over the fence on Tundikhel. Does this come under the Comprehensive Peace Accord, the Ass wonders.

It's getting more and more difficult to separate election campaigns and rallies as

they are happening **cheek to jowl**. Last week, the Marxist Leninist (Maley) faction of the CPN decided to have its first election rally at Ratna park. Trouble was, it was a Saturday and the venue clashed with couple of other **ahm sabahs** including one by the All Nepal Federation of Security Guards (Non-revolutionary).

But there were also two young circus artists who were staging their contortions to the public and pulling a huge crowd. The Maley audience started deserting to watch the circus kids squeezing through hoops, so the young comrades shooed the contortionists out of Tundikhel and in the process roughed up some of the spectators who dared to complain. This election is going to be a circus.



Peacenick minister Ram Chandra Poudel is the least popular member of the government among the international community. After his heated exchange with the Danish ambassador recently it is clear Ram Chandradai doesn't care too much for diplomatic niceties. The Ass wonders if he is the *bête noire* of the Europeans because he's the only one who can't stand them telling us what to do.

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